

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 1, 2019

[John 13:31-35](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Note: This is NOT one of the assigned texts for this week's lectionary, but was chosen thematically for our worship

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and "wonderings"

Commentary on John 13:31-35

(From *Homiletics*; "The Love Haptic", April 24, 2016)

Jesus' words to his disciples in today's lesson, John 13:31-35, contain one of his most important instructions to his followers, the new commandment of love (v. 34). In many ways, this simple command sums up the radically new direction of the faith of Jesus' earliest followers and the birth of Christianity.

Today's lesson is part of two larger blocks of material in John's gospel. John's account of the Last Supper begins in chapter 13 and extends through chapter 17; our passage occurs at a crucial point near the beginning of that narrative block.

Today's lesson is also the first of the so-called "farewell discourses" in John (chapters 13-16 and Jesus' great prayer for his disciples in chapter 17), in which Jesus attempts to explain to his disciples what his imminent departure means for their subsequent faith and way of life.

Jesus' words are introduced by the notice of the departure of Judas Iscariot ("he" of v. 31a) from the supper, following Jesus' symbolic indication of his betrayer (vv. 21-30). As frequently occurs elsewhere in the gospels, the disciples do not understand Jesus' words or gestures, and confusedly believe that Jesus' instruction for Judas to "Do quickly what you are going to do" (v. 27) refers to securing provisions for the Passover meal or providing for the poor from the common purse. What has actually taken place is that the wheels have been set in motion that will grind inexorably toward Jesus' suffering and death.

Jesus frequently refers to himself in all the gospels as "the Son of Man" (v. 31) -- 30 times in Matthew, 14 times in Mark, 25 times in Luke, 12 times in John. It is far and away his favorite self-designation -- and is used only by him in the gospels -- and carries a range of meanings. Based in the tradition of the OT -- Ezekiel is called "Son of Man" more than 90 times. and there is an important eschatological scene involving "one like a son of man" in Daniel (7:13, see the footnote on the original Aramaic) -- the term was a common designation for a human being by the time of Jesus. One important difference in the NT use of the term, however, is that it always occurs with the definite article -

- ο υιοξτου ανθρωπον -- and never indefinitely, as it always occurs in the Greek translation of the OT. In the NT, the term always designates Jesus (even in its single occurrence outside the gospels, in Acts 7:56), and not merely any human being.

The theme of the glorification of the Son of Man begins earlier in John and plays a prominent role in Johannine theology. Although the term glory appears throughout the gospels (the bulk occurring in John), the verbal form "to glorify, glorified" -- δοξασω -- is far less common in the Synoptics, occurring four times in Matthew, once in Mark and nine times in Luke. Against this, the root occurs some 16 times in John, far more times than in any other book in the NT.

Scholars sometimes divide the gospel of John into a "Book of Signs" and a "Book of Glory," based on the recognition that the gospel places particular emphasis on "signs" or miracles in its first chapters (1:19-12:50) and on Jesus' glory, as revealed by his impending sacrifice and resurrection, in its latter chapters (13:1-20:31). While this division is not airtight (references to Jesus' glory occur in the opening verses of the Prologue), it does point to an important theological assertion in John, namely, that the glorification of God in Christ is in the self-sacrifice and resurrection vindication more than in the awe-inspiring signs (which were often not understood or misunderstood by their contemporaries).

This is the theme taken up in Jesus' opening words in this discourse, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him" (v. 31). Jesus' certain anticipation of Judas' betrayal, combined with his steadfast refusal to attempt to escape the trap being laid for him, marks the willingness with which he will meet his captors and slayers.

One of the conspicuous linguistic similarities between the gospel of John and the epistle of 1 John is in the use of the phrase "little children" (v. 33) to refer to disciples. The Greek word, τεκνιον, occurs some nine times in the NT, seven times in the epistle, once in Galatians (4:19), and once in John's gospel, in today's passage. The word is never used literally for small children (a different Greek word, παιδιον, is commonly used for that purpose, as when small children were brought to Jesus), and it implies a bond that, while not mutual, nonetheless includes affection and a sense of protection and responsibility for the disciple on the part of the teacher.

Jesus informs his disciples that, just as he had earlier told his religious opponents (here loosely identified as "the Jews"; see 7:32-36; 8:21-23), he was going where they could not come, namely, back to his Father in heaven through his death and resurrection. This glorification will complete the cycle of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God announced in the Prologue to John's gospel (1:9, 14).

The new commandment Jesus gives his disciples in verses 34-35 continues the tradition of love as the supreme command, explicated elsewhere in the gospels (e.g., Mark 12:28-34, quoting Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-36), while, at the same time, modifying that command to refer it specifically to "one another," i.e., the community of disciples (probably gathered around or by the disciple John). The expression "new commandment" occurs only four times in the entire Bible, all of them in the Johannine writings (here and in 1 John 2:7, 8; 2 John 1:5), lending further evidence to the literary and theological points of contact among the various NT writings.

The kind of love Jesus commends to his followers is, of course, the self-sacrificial love he has shown in his formation of them into a community of believers, as well as the supreme form of self-giving love he is about to display in his passion and death for them and for the whole world. Although John's gospel makes explicit Jesus' sacrifice for the whole world ("For God so loved the world ..." 3:16), the gospel also makes clear that Jesus' disciples played a particular role in the understanding and transmission of that fact to outsiders. The knowledge imparted by Jesus to his disciples -- his "little children" -- provided the key to understanding the otherwise senseless and chaotic events surrounding his birth, life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection.

By showing his disciples his love, by providing them with this key to the apparent meaninglessness of history, Jesus was simultaneously providing them with a model for their own behavior, vis-à-vis their own communities and outsiders. His new commandment lays the foundation for both ecclesiology and missiology ("By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," v. 35).

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on John 13:31-35

1. Consider the context in which this passage is found in John's gospel (at the Last supper, just after Judas has been called out and left the room). In what ways does this context embody the themes of glory and love about which Jesus is speaking to the disciples in these few verses?
2. "I am with you only a little while longer..." (v. 33). As Jesus prepares the disciples to carry on in his imminent absence, he gives them a new commandment – to love one another. In what sense is this commandment "new"? Does it represent a break from the tradition in which they had been formed and had been practicing their faith? A continuation? A fulfillment? How does this commandment to love relate to the "work" of Jesus, which Brethren are fond of saying they are continuing?
3. "Love one another." Is the qualifier significant? Does the command to love hold sway only within the community of faith? If so, how does one determine who is "one of us", and what is the role of this set-apart community in relation to those beyond its bounds? If not, how are we to embody and show love in the context of real life?

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?